



Testimony to the Labor Committee
February 27, 2014
By Leslie Simoes, Executive Director

H.B. No. 5279 (RAISED) AN ACT ELIMINATING THE MINIMUM FAIR WAGE EXCEPTION FOR CERTAIN CITIZENS OF CONNECTICUT.

The Arc Connecticut is a 61-year old advocacy organization committed to promoting and protecting the basic civil basic rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and to promoting opportunities for their full inclusion in the life of their communities. We have 18 chapters across Connecticut providing direct support and services. We rose from grass roots advocacy and have hundreds of families and individuals with disabilities in our Arc family.

The Arc Connecticut is concerned about the potential consequences individuals with I/DD, their families and those who support them will be exposed to if Raised bill 5279 AN ACT ELIMINATING THE MINIMUM FAIR WAGE EXCEPTION FOR CERTAIN CITIZENS OF CONNECTICUT is allowed to move forward as written.

It is our belief that this committee would never intentionally cause harm to the residents of Connecticut you are trying to help with this conceptual language but I urge you to be thorough in your research and analysis and proceed with extreme caution. The Arc's position both on a national level and here in Connecticut is people with I/DD should have the supports necessary to enable them to find and keep community jobs based on their preferences, interests, and strengths, work alongside people without disabilities, receive competitive wages, and be free from workplace discrimination.

This bill should be about employment for persons with I/DD in its entirety, not just about the wage given for performing a job. The issue of wages is founded on a larger systemic dysfunction in the public support infrastructure to support persons with I/DD in employment.

Employment supports and services should use best practices, including assessing skills and interests, working with employers, matching jobs to skill sets and employer needs, providing individualized and ongoing job supports, designing reasonable job accommodations, integrating people into the workforce, building social skills necessary in the workplace, securing necessary ancillary services such as transportation and of course being paid a competitive wage. But without addressing the need to use these best practices first, addressing the wage issue is premature.

I think we fundamentally can all agree that people with I/DD can be employed in the community alongside people without disabilities and earn competitive wages. But what you may not know is that the ability for persons with I/DD to be supported; to make informed choices about their work and careers and have the resources to seek, obtain, and be successful in community employment are not always available and that employers need more support and education about the opportunities of employing persons with I/DD.

Historically, the majority of people with I/DD have been either unemployed or underemployed despite their ability, desire, and willingness to work in the community. Many have been placed in "prevocational" programs and "disability-only" workshops where they are paid below minimum wage and have little expectation of moving into jobs where they work alongside people without disabilities. When employed, few people have opportunities to advance, explore new possibilities, or, in their later years, retire.

Barriers to employment include, first and foremost, low societal expectations that foster job discrimination. In addition, unrealistically low limits on assets and earnings make people fear losing vital public benefits if they work too many hours or earn too much. Systemically, public resources fund service hours rather than outcomes and are often neither sufficient nor flexible enough to allow collaboration and blending of employment funding streams. Lack of other services like transportation or of accommodations like assistive technology can also hinder success.

Unfortunately we have built a vocational support system in Connecticut and across the country that uses these sub-minimum wage certificates and until the system is rebuilt with the funding and supports in place to remove them, it will crumble the system and the very people we are trying to advocate for could be hurt.

For all people with I/DD, publicly funded employment programs should include:

- Building infrastructure and supports needed to phase out the issuance of subminimum wage certificates, increase opportunities for competitive integrated employment, and put in place safeguards to protect the interests of any people affected by this shift.
- Public policy that encourages employers to hire people with I/DD. Giving employers incentives to hire people with I/DD like tax credits or other financial incentives to create the will to hire and keep people with I/DD employed.
- Training and information for employers and people with I/DD on how to access supports needed to find and keep jobs for persons with I/DD.
- A tool to measure and publicly report on outcomes on an ongoing basis.

- The flexibility for public resources to fund outcomes rather than service hours and allow collaboration and blending of employment funding streams.
- Working with the Connecticut General Assembly to raise societal expectations that eliminates discrimination.
- An increase in funding and infrastructure to expand services like transportation and accommodations like assistive technology so folks that need assistance to work to the capacity of their peers without disabilities can receive it.

These are Arc Connecticut's recommendations to you and offer these to be considered as amendments to the bill. We hope the discussion today around this bill and the impact on people with I/DD will foster a collaborative spirit to really look at the issue from all angles to develop a strategy and the mechanisms needed to move toward the end goal of eventual elimination of the sub-minimum wage certificates. **But individuals we support cannot be allowed to lose employment as a result of any efforts to do so.**

I ask the committee to amend the bill to include our recommendations listed in this testimony and I welcome the opportunity to work with the committee to move toward the common goal of the eventual elimination of these sub-minimum wage certificates.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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